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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 ANKARA 001451

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SUBJECT: TURKEY: TEMPEST IN ACADEMIC TEAPOT

Classified By: Political Counselor Daniel J. O'Grady, reasons 1.4 (b),(d)

¶1. (C) Summary and comment: President Abdullah Gul's August 5 appointment of 21 university rectors brought little joy to AKP's opponents. As one of the first high-profile selection procedures following the ruling Justice and Development Party's (AKP) narrow escape from being banned for anti-secularist activities, the appointment list was closely scrutinized for signs of partisanship. More than 30 academics from several state universities resigned August 6 to protest Gul's alleged use of political criteria in appointing the new rectors; they and other AKP critics charge Gul rejected top candidates selected in peer elections for those who support AKP's political positions. AKP MPs maintain Gul acted legally and consistent with past practices. The selection process, instituted in 1992, is widely seen as political and flawed, though few expect meaningful reform given entrenched interests in maintaining the status quo. With rectors for 17 new universities appointed last year and an additional 23 new rectors due to be appointed soon, the selection process offers Gul numerous opportunities to influence Turkey's academic leadership profile. If Gul's choices turn out to be based on merit, they will help ease fears he intends to use appointments to pack academia with pro-Islam rectors. But AKP critics will be hard to convince. End summary and comment.

University Rectors Appointments Engender Protests

¶2. (U) President Gul appointed rectors for 21 state universities to four-year terms August 5, in a closely watched process that generated accusations of partisanship and calls for the politicized selection process to be overhauled. Under a 1992 law, rectors are appointed through a three-phase system, with each university's faculty voting for six top candidates, who are then submitted to Turkey's Higher Education Board (YOK), Gazi University Dean of Communications Korkmaz Alemdar told us. YOK submits a short-list to the president composed of any three of the top six names; the president may appoint any of these three as rector. This year, YOK did not include five candidates who topped the peer vote in the short-list to the president, Alemdar explained. Gul chose the highest vote-getter from the YOK short-lists in 17 instances and the second highest in four cases. The overall result was that 12 of the 21 new rectors received the highest number of peer votes.

¶3. (U) Turkish media focused on alleged links between candidates' political views and the ultimate selections.

"Hurriyet" columnist Oktay Eksi noted that YOK failed to include the top vote-getter at Akdeniz University, Professor Mustafa Akaydin, an outspoken opponent of AKP's initiative to lift the headscarf ban at universities during his term as Inter-University Board President. "I am paying for the headscarf decision," Akaydin told the press. "There was no logical reason to leave me out." Eksi alleged Gul selected September 9 University second-place finisher Mehmet Fuzun because his brother is an AKP MP; May 19 University second-place finisher Huseyin Akan because he was an AKP candidate in 2007 elections, and passed over first-place finisher Mehmet Bakir because he investigated plagiarism claims against PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan's former undersecretary. In contrast, Gul selected Bogazici University's top candidate in the peer election over the second vote-getter, Ayse Soysal, despite Soysal's support for lifting the headscarf ban.

14. (U) Twelve academics resigned their administrative positions at the prestigious Istanbul Technical University to protest Gul's skipping over the school's top vote-getter to appoint second-place finisher Professor Muhammad Sahin. Five academics from Gazi University's faculty of medicine resigned their administrative positions with similar complaints. Deans of 10 faculties at Izmir's September 9 University issued a declaration saying the assignments do not reflect the will of the universities.

15. (C) Main opposition Republican People's Party (CHP) officials contend AKP, working through former party leader Gul, is attempting an end-run around the Constitutional

ANKARA 00001451 002 OF 003

Court's annulment of AKP-sponsored amendments to allow women to wear the Islamic headscarf at universities. CHP Istanbul Deputy Mustafa Ozyurek dubbed the assignments the "revenge of the turban," claiming AKP is working to remove from YOK and universities professors who oppose headscarves on campus. CHP Deputy Group Chair Kemal Kilicdaroglu claimed AKP already elevated one of its loyalists to the YOK chairmanship and is now attempting to fill university cadres with AKP devotees who would permit headscarves at universities in practice, if not by law. AKP officials who lambasted former President Sezer for "undemocratic actions" when he did not select the top vote-getters in university elections now argue there is nothing wrong with AKP doing the same thing, Kilicdaroglu told us. In a letter to Gul, Koc University rector Atilla Askar reminded Gul of AKP's earlier statements urging Sezer to respect peer election results.

AKP Defends Appointments

16. (C) In Gul's defense, AKP Deputy Group Chair Mustafa Elitas told us Gul acted consistently with the 1992 law and the constitution. Gul selected 17 of YOK's first choices and 4 of its second choices, he noted, adding Gul had no influence or control over whether YOK selected the winners of the university elections for the short-lists. Elitas called CHP's argument hypocritical because the party did not protest in 2007, when President Sezer appointed five candidates who did not receive the highest number of votes. Elitas also pointed to Gazi University, where, in 2004, CHP did not protest when President Sezer passed over top vote-getter Riza Ayhan and selected second-place finisher Kadri Yamac. This year, CHP complained when President Gul selected Ayhan even though Yamac this time finished first, a result Elitas called "divine justice." Others attributed the Ayhan-Yamac flip-flop to corruption allegations brought against Ayhan in 2004 and against Yamac this year.

17. (C) Metropoll President Professor Ozer Sencar, not affiliated with AKP, told us the rectorship appointment system always works as it did this year. "It has always been a political, ideological process," he said, noting that when he was an active professor he received the most votes in the

peer elections, with 47 percent of the vote, but was not selected by YOK. Sencar maintained the risk of being banned in connection with the AKP closure case caused Gul to act more moderately on the rectors appointments, in contrast to Sezer's radical approach of never assigning anyone who wasn't a strong Kemalist. While AKP can try to eliminate extreme Kemalists and leftists at universities and move in conservatives as rectors, Sencar said, "they won't be able to change the characteristics of the strongly secularist universities."

AKP Consolidating Power

18. (C) Professor Aykan Erdemir, Middle East Technical University's (METU) Associate Dean of Graduate Programs, found nothing unusual about YOK and the president using discretionary appointment powers or academics resigning on selection of a new dean. What differed this year, according to Erdemir, was the calculated, political collaboration between YOK and Gul. In past elections, presidents screened candidates based on broad fundamental values, such as views of the constitution and principles of the Turkish Republic. Over the past year, an AKP loyalist was appointed YOK Chairman and, through attrition and new appointments, AKP loyalists now hold a majority on the YOK board. Erdemir claimed Gul and the new YOK board coordinated their efforts to appoint candidates because of their patronage of AKP or their political views on specific AKP initiatives, such as the headscarf.

19. (C) Erdemir, Alemdar, and other academics told us Gul took a short-sighted view by being obviously partisan in selecting some rectors. Alemdar explained it is one thing to disregard a small, new university's choices for rector, but another to ignore the choices of a prestigious, well-established university like Istanbul Technical, which has a 300-year tradition and has proved able to govern itself. Erdemir said the visibly partisan manner in which candidates were selected

ANKARA 00001451 003 OF 003

was a tremendous blow to morale at many state universities, where idealistic professors work for low pay. He expects many to begin leaving for private universities.

Incessant Political Meddling Necessitates New System

110. (C) Contacts across the political spectrum agree a new selection system is needed. Metropoll's Sencar is convinced the appointment process will remain political without a complete overhaul. He suggests either abolishing peer elections and establishing a Trustees Board to choose candidates or allowing universities to nominate candidates directly to the president without YOK's involvement. Gazi University's Alemdar agreed, noting academics are disillusioned to see the winning university candidates overlooked; he proposes removing YOK and the president from the process. Both AKP's Elitas and CHP's Kilicdaroglu also admit the system needs to change, though neither offered concrete proposals. Few expect follow-through on calls to change the process, however. Sencar predicted the brouhaha would last a week and then be forgotten, adding, "Political parties want to use the process for their own advantage rather than improving the system." It may take the growing influence of prestigious private universities -- outside YOK's jurisdiction -- to force change, as top-notch academics flee the state system for better paying, better managed positions.

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